

Characters

- REMY CHARLIP
- MARIA IRENE FORNES
- AILEEN PASSLOFF
- FLORENCE TARLOW

A Vietnamese Wedding was first enacted at Washington Square Methodist Church in New York on February 4, 1967, as part of the week-long cumulative protest against American involvement in Vietnam called Angry Arts Week. The following participated as readers:

Remy Charlip, Maria Irene Fornes, Aileen Passloff, Florence, Tarlow.

The following objects are to be set in the manner indicated in the diagram.

10 Chairs

10 5x7 Cards

3 Flower garlands (about 24" around)

7 Red sashes (about 5' long)

8 Red trays or plates
Areca leaves (or a substitute)
Betel nuts (or a substitute)

1 Ring

1 Necklace

1 Bracelet

3 Bags of chocolate money

2 3x5 Cards

1 Colorful floor mat

5 Candles and holders

1 Sheet of red rice paper

1 Match box

1 Pen

4 Whistles

4 Noisemakers

1 Tape of Vietnamese music (*Music of Vietnam*, Ethnic Folkways Library FE 4352, is suggested)

The ten 5x7 cards will indicate the position of the participants and will be placed on the chairs as shown in the diagram. The flower wreaths are to be placed on the back of chairs 5, 6, 7. The red sashes are to be placed on the back of chairs 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10. Seven trays are to be placed on the floor facing chairs 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10. They are to contain areca leaves and betel nuts. Besides these, the Groom's tray will contain the ring, the necklace, and the bracelet; the Father of the Groom's will contain the 3 chocolate money bags and a 3x5 card with the following speech:

Friends, neighbors, and
newly acquired family; may we take
your daughter to our house?

The second 3x5 card should have the following speech:

Friends, neighbors, and
newly acquired family; we allow you
to take out daughter to your house.

and should be held by Florence.

The eighth red tray should be in a place accessible to Irene, and will contain the pen, the matches and the red rice paper with the following message:

Rose Silk Thread God, look after our marriage.

Florence, Remy, Aileen, and Irene will hold the whistles and noisemakers and use them at the end of the piece.

A Vietnamese Wedding is not a play. Rehearsals should serve the sole purpose of greeting the readers acquainted with the text and the actions of the piece. The four people conducting the piece are hosts to the members of the audience who will enact the wedding, and their behavior should be casual, gracious, and unobtrusive.

Act

(Florence, Remy, Aileen, and Irene stand as indicated in the diagram.)

REMY CHARLIP

We are going to present to you a Vietnamese wedding. And we are going to ask a few of you to help us. What you have to do is very simple. It doesn't require any acting ability, and we will tell you what to do as we go along. First, we'll choose the matchmaker.

(Remy chooses the members of the wedding party from the audience. Irene, Florence, and Aileen help them to their seats, and help them put on their sashes around their waists and garlands on their heads.)

Then, we'll choose the father and the mother of the bride.

Then, the father and the mother of the groom.

Then, the groom.

Then, we choose the bride.

Now, the distinguished elder member of the groom's family.

And then, two young members of the groom's family.

(Florence, Remy, Aileen, and Irene return to their positions.)

FLORENCE TARLOW

In Vietnam, especially in the cities, there are young people who have rebelled against traditional customs. That is, they prefer to take it upon themselves to choose their own marital partner as they do in western countries. However, for the most part, Vietnamese youths follow tradition. Marriages are arranged by the parents with the aid of an experienced matchmaker. The matching of a pair is a complex and delicate matter. It requires the love and wisdom of parents, plus the objective judgment of a matchmaker. The bride and groom must be of equal social standing, equal education, and their moral history must also be equal. Once the bride and groom are chosen according to these standards, their horoscopes are drawn. If the horoscopes indicate that their characters are not compatible or that there might be conflict between them at some point in their lives, another mate is chosen.

AILEEN PASSLOF

If a family is asked for their daughter or son in marriage, and they wish to refuse the offer without offending the suitor's family, they speak to the astrologer privately.

FLORENCE TARLOW

If the offer is acceptable and the charts propitious, the wedding date is chosen.

REMY CHARLIP

(To the Bride.)

When is your birthday?

(The Bride answers. To provide an example we will say she has answered May fifth. Remy then passes the information on to Florence.)

May fifth.

(Florence looks up the date in the accompanying chart and replies.)

January 1-20: Capricorn

January 21-31: Aquarius

February 1-19: Aquarius

February 20-28: Pisces

March 1-20: Pisces

March 21-31: Aries

April 1-19: Aries

April 20-30: Taurus

May 1-20: Taurus

May 21-31: Gemini

June 1-21: Gemini

June 22-30: Cancer

July 1-21: Cancer

July 22-31: Leo

August 1-21: Leo

August 22-31: Virgo

September 1-22: Virgo

September 23-30: Libra

October 1-22: Libra

October 23-31: Scorpio

November 1-21: Scorpio

November 22-30: Sagittarius

December 1-21: Sagittarius

December 22-31: Capricorn

FLORENCE TARLOW

Taurus.

REMY CHARLIP

(To the Groom.)

When is your birthday?

(The Groom answers. We will say he was born November fifth.)

REMY CHARLIP

(To Florence.)

November fifth.

(Florence looks up the date in the chart.)

FLORENCE TARLOW

Scorpio

REMY CHARLIP

Taurus and Scorpio. Very good!

AILEEN PASSLOF

Very, very good!

FLORENCE TARLOW

Excellent!

REMY CHARLIP

Formerly, girls were wed as young as thirteen and boys at sixteen. The reason for early marriages was usually economic. For some families, to give their daughter away meant one less mouth to feed. For others, to gain a daughter meant one more person to help with the housework. For some, the addition of a male meant another helping hand in the field. There was no general rule as to whether it was convenient to add or to subtract one number in the family. It depended on the particular needs of each household. These early marriages were usually satisfactory to the family, but as the young people grew, it happened occasionally that they did not find their mate to their liking. A young woman tells us about her unhappy marriage in this popular poem:

AILEEN PASSLOF

My mother was greedy.
She wanted
A basket of rice,
A fat pig,
And a Hang Kung tail.

I asked her to refuse.
But she said I was
Too young to know,
And brought me to my groom.

Now I am fully grown.
I am tall and my husband is short.

We are like a pair of unequal chopsticks.

REMY CHARLIP

Child marriages are no longer common in Vietnam.

AILEEN PASSLOF

Though many things have changed, the wedding ritual remains the same. The betel nut and the areca leaf are symbolic of love and good will, and they are always exchanged as a most valuable offering between the bride's and the groom's families. The custom derives from an ancient myth.

FLORENCE TARLOW

During the reign of Hung Wung III, there was a mandarin named Cao, who had two beautiful sons, Tan and Sung. One day, the mandarin and his wife died, and the two boys were left without a father, a mother, a house, or money. The boys had to go

from town to town looking for work, and they could find none.

One day they came to the house of Magistrate Luu who happened to be a friend of their father Cao. Luu received the boys in his house, and said: "I never had a son and now I have two." It was true that Magistrate Luu didn't have a son, but he had a daughter who was as fair as a white lotus and as fresh as a spring rose. Naturally, both boys loved her the moment they saw her. But neither of them spoke to her of his love because each knew his brother also loved her.

Luu realized what was happening. He knew that the boys would become old and shriveled before they spoke to the maiden. To prevent that from happening, he decided he would follow the custom and give his daughter to the eldest. One day he said to Sung: "Which one of you is the eldest?" And Sung said: "Tan is the eldest," but Tan quickly said: "Sung is the eldest." Only one of them was telling the truth. But Luu, who was a very clever fellow, decided he would not ask any more questions. He knew the boys would keep giving him the same answers. Instead, that night for dinner, he placed only one pair of chopsticks between the brothers.

When dinner was served, Sung, without giving it any thought, picked up the chopsticks and handed them to Tan. And Tan, without giving it any thought, received the chopsticks and bent down to eat, as any older brother would. "I found you out," said Luu to Tan. "You are the eldest. You will marry my daughter."

REMY CHARLIP

Tan was now the happiest of men in all of Vietnam. He spent all his time taking walks with his new bride, reciting poetry to her, and singing love songs.

Sung overcame his love for the fair maiden and accepted his lot, for he wanted only joy and happiness for his beloved brother. But after a while, he realized that he was very lonely. He sat alone in his room waiting for a sign of care, or friendship, from Tan ... but nothing happened.

In wild sorrow, he ran away from home, for he could stand the sadness no more. He ran and ran, passing leafy forests and flat meadows, until he reached the dark blue sea. Night came and Sung fell exhausted onto the ground, hungry and thirsty. His head was as hot as fire. And he cried and cried until he died and was turned into a white chalky rock.

When Tan realized his brother was gone, he went after him. He passed leafy forests and the flat meadows and he arrived at the same dark blue sea. He too was exhausted. He sat down by the white chalky rock, and he cried and cried until he died. And he was turned into a tree with a straight stem and green palms. It was the areca tree.

AILEEN PASSLOF

The lovely maiden missed her husband so much that she set off one day to look for him. She went along the same way as the brothers and reached the sea and lay down exhausted at the foot of the tall areca tree. Tears of despair rolled down her cheeks and she cried sorrowfully until she died. She was turned into a creeping plant--the betel--which twined around the lofty trunk of the areca tree.

That night, all the people in the village nearby had the same dream. They all dreamt the story of Tan, Sung and the maiden. The strange occurrence came to the ears of King Hung Wung III, who said: "If they were so devoted to each other, let us mix the three things, the rock, the areca leaf, and the betel nut, and see what happens." They burned the rock, which became white and soft, and they wrapped it in an areca leaf. Then they cut a piece of betel nut, and squeezed them all together. The mixture became liquid and red, like blood. The king then said: "This is the true symbol of conjugal and fraternal love. Let the tree and the plant be grown everywhere to remind us of true devotion and love. And let us chew the betel nut so that affection and good will will reign among us."

FLORENCE TARLOW

The habitual chewing of the betel nut produces a blackening effect on the teeth, until they appear as though they have been lacquered. In the past, such black teeth were an object of admiration. A young man tells us about his loved one's teeth in a popular poem:

REMY CHARLIP

Do you remember me when you go home?

When I go home I remember your teeth.

I would pay one hundred taels
For your beautiful lips.

But for your black teeth
I would pay much more.

AILEEN PASSLOF

The wedding ceremony.

FLORENCE TARLOW

The procedure is very formal. The date and hour must be exact, according to horoscopic readings. Everybody wears his best clothing. The boy's family wears red sashes around their waists.

REMY CHARLIP

The boy's family walks from the boy's home to the girl's home in a ceremonial procession.

(Irene tells the members of the Groom's party to stand and pick up their trays. She leads them in a procession around the theatre aisles, while Aileen reads the following speech. The Vietnamese music is played softly.)

AILEEN PASSLOF

The matchmaker has previously discussed the amount and kind of gifts. As the gifts are to be distributed among the bride's family and friends, the larger the family the more gifts are required. If the groom's family is rich, the gifts will include sacks of grain, live animals, clothing, candles, incense, tea, cakes, betel nuts and areca leaves, but no matter how poor the family is, there will always be betel nuts and areca leaves.

FLORENCE TARLOW

The gifts are placed on the ancestral altar by the groom's party.

(Irene instructs the party to place the trays on the altar [floor mat]. Then she instructs the Groom and his Father to stand to the left of the altar, and the rest to the right.)

REMY CHARLIP

The candles are lit.

(Irene lights the candles with the help of some of the Groom's family. The music stops.)

AILEEN PASSLOF

The bridegroom gives the bride jewels--an engagement ring, a necklace and a bracelet.

(If the Groom doesn't act of his own accord, Irene will tell him what to do. The same applies to any of the following directions.)

FLORENCE TARLOW

The father of the groom gives the bride, her father, and her mother a certain amount of money.

(He does.)

REMY CHARLIP

The groom's father makes a solemn request to take the bride away to their home.

(The Groom's Father reads the card on his place.)

Solemnly the father of the bride agrees.

(Florence gives the Father of the Bride his card to read. He reads it out loud.)

Then they all bow three times.

(Everyone bows three times. Irene stands next to the Groom with her tray.)

AILEEN PASSLOF

A message to the genie of marriage, the Rose Silk Thread God, is written on a red sheet of paper.

(Irene gives the red paper to the Groom to sign.)

Then, it is burned, so that the message will reach the genie.

(The Groom burns the message.)

FLORENCE TARLOW

At this point, the couple is considered married.

(Irene tells the Groom to take the Bride by the hand and head the procession.)

And a party is held with a lot of speechmaking, gift-giving, and merrymaking.

(Irene leads the procession, going first around the readers, then, along the aisles. The music starts softly while Remy reads.)

The groom's family traditionally acts as though they are very anxious to take the bride to their home. The groom's entourage then begins the trip home in the form of a procession with the bride and her attendants, friends, and relatives joining in. Little children sometimes set up roadblocks and ask tolls of the wedding party. These are readily paid, as they consider it bad luck to refuse.

FLORENCE TARLOW

Upon arrival at the groom's house, the party is met by the loud noise of firecrackers.

(The music plays loudly. Florence, Remy, and Aileen join the procession, and blow their whistles. Irene also blows her whistle and leads the procession out of the theatre.)

END